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ABSTRACT

One of the hottest literacy topics currently is "balanced literacy"--the centrist position of experts in the teaching and learning of literacy. Balanced literacy programs utilize both explicit skill instruction and authentic text. A study documented and discovered the enacted practices of an exemplary first grade teacher (with 24 students) using a "balanced literacy program." The guiding questions for the study were: What components constitute the balanced literacy program in this classroom? What model has been adopted by the school district and is mandated through the curriculum? Is this the model the teacher articulates and enacts? If there are differences between the espoused model and the enacted model, what are they and why are they present? What does the teacher's daily and weekly literacy practice look like? An interpretive approach was used to gather an array of data. A thorough description of the classroom environment was documented through fieldnotes, photos, and mapping. An interview protocol was used to record the perceptions and beliefs of the teacher during audiotaped interviews. Data analysis, on-going throughout the study, suggests that the teacher enacts a more complex and rich model than the Four Blocks model that is mandated by the school district. The Complex Model has additional components the teacher believes are essential to the literacy development of all early readers/writers, such as daily read aloud, shared book/poetry experiences, repeated readings, modeled/interactive writing, rich oral discourse experiences, and a home reading and writing program. (Contains 25 references and the Complex Model.) (NKA)

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Balanced Literacy in a First Grade Classroom: Practices, Tensions and Potentials

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One of the hottest literacy topics in the 1990's is "balanced literacy"(Cassidy & Cassidy, 1998/1999;) It is the centrist position of experts in the teaching and learning of literacy (Au, Carroll, & Scheu, 1997; McIntyre & Pressley, 1996; Pearson & Raphael, 1999). Balanced literacy programs, as currently described, utilize both explicit skill instruction and authentic text (McIntyre & Pressley, 1996). This position draws from two distinct bodies of research that are currently producing heated debates over what constitutes effective early literacy instruction. The bottom line to this debate is the issue of "breaking the code" versus "understanding what we read" (Chall, 1967; 1997; Lyon, 1997; Pearson & Raphael, 1999). The debate is ongoing as teachers and educators across the nation are faced with the question: What type of program best facilitates early literacy development?

Currently, there are conceptual models of balanced literacy such as Hammond's (1999), as well as models which are being adopted and/or adapted for practice in public schools. These models include the Four Blocks Model (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998; 1991); The Kamehameha Early Education Program Whole Literacy Curriculum (Au 1997; Carroll, Wilson & Au, 1996); Success For All (Slavin, Madden, Dolan & Wasik, 1996); classroom programs described in books by Graves, Van Den Broek, & Taylor, (1996) and McIntyre & Pressley (1996); and others. The variations yet commonalities within and across these programs suggest that there are many ways to achieve effective early literacy instruction with a balanced literacy approach and rather than searching for the one perfect program researchers should try to identify the common characteristics of effective teachers using balanced literacy programs. While the components of the balanced literacy program are important, the bottom line in the research is that it is not the program but the teacher that makes the critical difference in the literacy learning of students. The research of Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, & Morrow (1998) has provided a list of characteristics of the effective practices of first grade teachers in several schools across the country. By more closely examining the enacted literacy practices of effective teachers with their students in their classrooms one may more fully understand the complexity of their programs, their practices, their beliefs, their growth or personal development systems and how to assist and enable other classroom teachers to become equally effective. What is it that makes one teacher continue to grow and thrive while others simply give into the status quo?

Teaching and learning practices grounded in the sociocultural theory of Vygotsky (1978) explain how social and cultural contexts affect children's learning. The classroom, a social and cultural context, and its participants (both students and the teacher) influence students' learning. Students learn best when working in their zones of proximal development through social interaction with their peers and teacher who assist and challenge them to perform more sophisticated or complex tasks. Social interaction provides students with

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opportunities to work on the interpersonal level and, in time, these learnings result in development at the intrapersonal level (Rogoff, 1990; Vygotsky, 1978).

The purpose of this study was to document and discover the enacted practices of an exemplary first grade teacher using a "balanced literacy program." The guiding questions for this study were: What components constitute the balanced literacy program in this classroom? What model has been adopted by the school district and is mandated through the curriculum? Is this the model the teacher articulates and enacts? If there are differences between the espoused model and the enacted model what are they and why are they present? What does the teacher's daily and weekly literacy practice look like? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this model from the teacher's perspective? And from the perspective of the researchers?

Setting, Participants, and an Overview of the Research

This research was conducted during the 1998-1999 school year in one public elementary school setting in a Mid-western suburban school district. The school qualifies as and receives funding from the United States Government through Title 1. A highly knowledgeable Caucasian first grade teacher and her 24 students were the focus of the research. 75% of the students were Caucasian while 25% were from ethnic and racial minority groups. Approximately 25% of the students in this class were from lower socioeconomic status homes.

An interpretive approach to research was used to gather a rich array of data that illuminated the questions raised (Erickson, 1986). A thorough description of the classroom environment was documented through fieldnotes, photos and mapping. Through participant observation, the researchers--a university assistant professor and a doctoral student-- collected fieldnotes and audiotapes on the literacy activities which occurred, the social contexts for literacy activities (such as small groups of children working with a teacher), the teacher's and children's roles, and the literacy materials utilized. An interview protocol was used to record the perceptions and beliefs of the teacher during audiotaped interviews. Audiotapes were transcribed. Artifacts were collected (Bogden & Biklen, 1992; 1982; Spradley, 1979).

Data analysis was on-going throughout the study and involved a systematic searching through and arrangement of concurrent pieces of data. Triangulation of data sources (Mathison, 1988) and an audit analysis (Guba, 1981) were utilized to enhance reliability and validity. The teacher assisted in this process.

The Teacher and Her Enacted Balanced Literacy Practices

Sue is a first grade teacher in her sixth year of teaching. She has a master's degree in reading and language arts education and an undergraduate degree in business. Teaching is her second career. While working on her master's degree at a local university Sue became acquainted with the instructor who is the primary researcher in this study. During the past several years the instructor, a Caucasian female, has conducted research in Sue's school--which was an outgrowth of their meeting in a class-- and in her classroom. Over time Joyce and Sue have become

friends, colleagues and co-researchers. Observations of Sue's teaching reveal that Sue is a highly effective first grade teacher based upon the characteristics established by Pressley, Wharton-McDonald, Allington, Block, & Morrow (1998). Sue's teaching surpasses the criteria established by Pressley et. al. (1998) and includes at least one additional category not addressed in their research, that of a daily home-school literacy program.

Sue's balanced literacy program was initially based upon the Cunningham Four Blocks approach which was adopted and mandated by the local school district several years ago. Sue has modified the program based upon her personal beliefs, observations of students needs, her goals for students, and the continuing dialogue she has had with Joyce about literacy over three years. Sue believes that the most important goal for first graders is for them to love reading and see themselves as readers. And Sue is whole heartedly committed to finding ways to achieve this with each and every student in her classroom.

Sue's Complex Model of Balanced Literacy includes: Oral Language, Guided Reading, Shared Poem, Read Aloud, Independent/Buddy Reading, Word Study, Modeled/Interactive Writing, Independent Writing, Word Study and Literacy Centers. Additionally a Home-School connection extends and enhances the activities students do in school. Oral language is seen as a critical component of this model because it is the connective tissue which Sue uses to connect learnings within structures and across structures. Oral language enables her to reinforce and link learnings so that each literacy structure has its own routines yet is always seen as part of and connected to a greater whole. While each of these components is important they are given varying amounts of attention and time in Sue's program based upon her beliefs that some of these activities are more important in students' current development. Her goals for her students and her assessment of students' strengths and needs and on-going performance informs decisions about use of time. The model is further enhanced by a rich interactive and social classroom community. Friendship, hard work, and fun while learning are norms in Sue's room. Sue's Complex Model of Balanced Literacy occurs each day during a two and one/half hour to three hour literacy block. (See descriptor sheet for information about each structure in the model.) Sue's model was designed over the course of three years as Joyce and Sue worked collaboratively together.

Sue is a highly reflective practitioner who is constantly seeking better ways to enhance and refine her literacy program because she wants to be able to meet the needs of all her students. She loves to learn about new and better ways of doing things but is always careful not to abandon good exisiting ways of doing in the process. Sue has found it important to have a colleague (Joyce) with whom she may talk and think through her practices.

Sue is a highly skilled and efficient observer of children who kidwatches all the time and makes mental notes to herself. She often shares these mental notes with students' in some form such as positive or constructive feedback. Sue also uses assessment tools such as Running Records (Clay, 1986) to keep her on track of individual student capabilities.

Results

Analysis of the data suggests that the teacher enacts a more complex and rich model than the Four Blocks model (Cunningham, Hall, & Defee, 1998; 1991) that is mandated by the school district. The Complex Model has additional components the teacher believes are essential to the literacy development of all early readers and writers. The added components include daily read aloud, shared book/poetry experiences, repeated readings, modeled/interactive writing, rich oral discourse experiences and a home reading and writing program. Oral discourse creates a web of interconnections for students within a literacy structure or across structures. This was consistently noted in the data as a crucial feature. Talking and listening are essential to this teacher's success with students. Students were highly engaged in learning and it was a norm of the classroom community. Community was very important in the fabric of thinking, learning and doing.

The teacher's rich knowledge base, ability to articulate her beliefs and practices and ability to trace the development of her knowledge base distinguishes her from her colleagues. As a reflective practitioner, she is constantly questioning her own practices and beliefs (Schon,1984; Dewey, 1933). Her effectiveness with students is in part a product of her ability to interweave her knowledge of best literacy practices with her knowledge of her individual students' strengths and needs. This teacher weaves a tapestry for literacy learning throughout the day. Classroom discourse, discussion, explicit instruction, and activities which motivate students to actively participate are commonplace.

Despite what she is able to accomplish with students, the teacher still encounters challenges in her literacy practice. Most of these challenges would require the local school district to alter its curriculum and other practices related to the classroom. Constraints of time and district mandates for content area learning limit the time that can be spent by students in literacy learning even though the teacher integrates literacy learning throughout these activities whenever possible. Additionally the teacher would like to focus her attention on further refinement of the writing structures.

The large number of first grade students in this classroom limits the quality and frequency of literacy events which the teacher can provide to support each individual student's fullest literacy development. The demands of an assessment-laden curriculum interferes and competes with time for instruction. Pull-out programs that are staffed by paraprofessionals require the teacher to orchestrate an even more complex instructional program which, at times, fragments students' literacy experiences in the classroom (Allington & McGill-Franzen, 1989).

Implications

This study illuminates the differences between a district's mandated Four Blocks model (Cunningham & Hall, & Defee, 1998; 1991) and a teacher's enacted practices and personal model of early balanced literacy. A careful reading of articles on the Four Blocks model (Cunningham & Hall, & Defee, 1998; 1991) reveals that some of the additional components (this teacher utilizes) are described in the articles, yet are not captured in the simplistic titling of the four modules--self-selected reading, guided reading, writing, and working with

words-- which comprise the model. Teachers may remember the four modules and not be aware of or enact the additional components which the articles mention. Another hypothesis is that some of the titles in this model are misleading. District inservice training on the model may not include these additional components. This indicates the importance of careful and thorough training of teachers in a fully explicated model that a district mandates. This study suggests that an exemplary teacher is able to develop, compensate, and enact a balanced literacy program that is informed by her knowledge base, students' goals and quest for excellence.

The number of students districts place in first grade classrooms needs to be more fully examined. The recent position statement from the International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children suggested that first grade classrooms should have no more than eighteen students (International Reading Association and the National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1998). Assessment is another issue which needs more thoughtful and reflective examination. The balancing of assessment and instruction in classrooms is an issue that educational leaders and teachers need to resolve. Time spent in assessment is time stolen from instruction.

This study recognizes that exemplary teachers should be given greater voice and power in decisions about the use of students' time during the school day . The rich knowledge base and schemata which this exemplary teacher draws upon indicates how critical ongoing teacher development opportunities-- quality extended inservice programs, quality graduate level programs, professional reading materials, teacher research communities, etc.-- and a personal commitment to excellence are for success (Wharton-McDonald, Pressley, & Hampston, 1998). Pressley (McIntyre & Pressley, 1996) has commented on this challenge and charges the educational community with finding more and better ways of assisting a greater number of teachers in becoming true professionals. Balanced literacy is not a simplistic program to implement and the success or failure of such a program is dependent on each individual teacher's ability to execute the program with her students. The challenge is how do we bring all teachers to this level of professionalism.

Our hope is that teachers, administrators and others that read this study will learn more about the complexity of a quality balanced literacy model, how important it is for each structure to work with precision, and how the sum of the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

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The Complex Model

Guided Reading	Shared Poem	Word Study	Literacy Centers
• Narrative and Expository Leveled Text • Comprehension/Meaning • Strategies/Skills, Fluency, Automaticity, Word Study • Recursive Frame of Rereading, Before, During, After Reading • Silent & Oral • Small Group • Daily • Teacher Led/Interactive • Homogeneous Group in Students' ZPDs • Whole-Part-Whole • 10-15 Minutes	• One Poem Chart Per Week with Daily Differentiated Activity • Comprehension/Meaning • Multiple Rereadings • Fluency, Skills, Automaticity • Students Have Personal Copy to Reread • Class Poetry Book • Whole Group to Independent Reading • Daily • Teacher Led/Interactive • Careful Selection with Time of Year and Weekly Word Wall • Whole-Part-Whole • 10-15 Minutes	• Comprehension/Meaning • 5 Wall Words Per Week • Onsets and Rimes Games I.E. Making Words, Hangman • 3 Times a Week • Whole Group • Whole-Part-Whole • 20 Minutes	• **Practice** On Own and with Friends • Self Expression & Ownership of Literacy • a Variety of Activities • Fun & Engaging • Daily • 20-30 Minutes
Independent/Buddy Reading	**Read Aloud**	**Writing**	**Modeled/Interactive Writing**
• Browse, Read, Reread • Enjoyment, Habit • Rotating Themed Baskets/ or Writing at Computer • Different Levels of Text • Daily • On Your Own or with a Friend • 20 Minutes	• Comprehension/Meaning • Modeling Reading Like a Reader • Interactive; Discussion, Thinking Aloud; Modeling of Strategies, Vocabulary • Seasonal, Thematic, Genre, Author Study, Big Book • Daily • Teacher Reads Books • Expressive Reading • 10-15 Minutes	• Individual Writing in ZPD • On My Own and Talk with Peers • Momentary Teacher One-On-One Scaffolding • Self Selected with Occasional Topic Prompts • Sharing of Writing • 3 Times a Week • Journal • 20 Minutes	• Teacher Models or Teacher and Students Jointly Construct Message • Making Meaning • Rereading of Message • 2 -3 Times a Week • Whole Group • Whole-Part-Whole (Message-Mechanics Message) • 5-10 Minutes
Home School Connections			**Oral Language**

Read& Share
• Students Read Aloud, Read Together, Read to Parents at Home
• Daily Exchange of Easy to Read Books
• Teacher Charting of Books Read
	Parent Newsletter
	• Guidance On Parent-Child Literacy Interactions Such As:
	  • Strategies
	  • How to Read Aloud
	  • Oral Language
	  • Writing
	• Oral Language Games
	• Writing
	• Weekly
		Parent Communication
		• Weekly Folder Notes
		• Conferences
		
		Tedy Bear Journal
		• Take Home Bear and Journal to Write in
		• Sharing at School
			• Communication How-to's:
			  • Effective Talkers
			  • Effective Readers
			  • Effective Listeners
			  • Effective Writers
			• Making Meaning
			• Making Learning Connections **Between** and **Within** Structures
			• to Discover and Clarify What Students Do and Do Not Know --Prior Knowledge

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